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ABSTRACT

This document addresses new insights into the complex cognitive processes involved in reading and their effects on programs and teachers in social studies. Indices are examined that consider: (1) students' reading performance; (2) teacher behavior; (3) textbook readability; and (4) structure for explanation of textual material. Research indicates that today: (1) a large number of students cannot read and comprehend social studies textbooks; (2) a large number of teachers fail to deal with the problems of reading which impair learning, while at the same time they believe that a lack of reading skills is a major problem; (3) commercial social studies reading programs are not effective; and (4) there is a widening gap between new knowledge about reading and the production of social studies instructional materials. A need exists for new models, new patterns of staff development, motivational strategies, prereading programs, and vocabulary development. (JHP)

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Prepared for the Annual Meeting
of the Social Science Education Consortium
June, 1987

by

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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE CRISIS IN READING IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES?

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Introduction

The basic problem addressed in this paper is the status of reading in the social studies. Over a decade ago after an examination of a substantial amount of research, I argued that the problems of reading in the social studies had reached crisis proportions. [1]About the same time, Barry Beyer and others were sounding a call to go "back to the basics in social studies."

It seems appropriate at this juncture for several reasons to revisit the status of a movement designed to analyze and alleviate those problems. First, as some reading researchers have point out "the past decade has been a remarkable one in gaining insights into the complex cognitive processes involved in reading." [2]A substantial part of this new knowledge stems from the work of the Center for the Study of REading established by the National Institute of Education at the University of Illinois. A part of that new knowledge is reflected in the research related to schema theory and metacognition both of which have significant implications for the teaching of social studies. A legitimate question then is to what extent has this new understanding of the reading process affected both programs and teachers in the social studies?

Secondly, in the last decade professional organizations such as the National Council for the Social Studies, the International Reading Association and the Social Science Education Consortium have disseminated information about new approaches to teaching reading in the social studies through publications and programs. Special interest groups have been formed in both the IRA and NCSS to provide forums to encourage interdisciplinary efforts to improve reading in social studies.

Thirdly, since 1973, an increasing number of states have moved to require training in reading of content area teachers. In 1973, only four states and the District of Columbia required such preparation. By 1984, 32 states had a reading requirement for all academic content area teachers at the secondary level.[3] In these states (and others without requirements), extensive staff development programs on reading in the content areas have been in place for some time. At the state and national level, of course, reading in social studies has been only a part of a larger movement (supported by reading groups) called reading in the content areas.

Indices of Status

Given the resources allocated to the problem in the last ten years once can logically expect to find evidence of clear progress. Furthermore, the interest in reading in the social studies appears waning in professional circles if there is any indication in the topics treated at state, regional and national NCSS meetings. One could conclude that with the decline in interest, the problem has diminished in importance. While a detailed, comprehensive analysis is not within the scope of this paper, it is possible to derive some insights into the impact of the movement by surveying reliable research within certain indices. These indices (some of

which were used in the 1976 article) may help us form a tentative estimate of the status of reading in the social studies. Included in the indices are (a) reading performance of students, (b) teacher behavior, (c) readability of texts, (d) comprehension instruction within programs, and (e) structure for explanation within texts.

Reading Performance of Pupils. One measure of pupil performance may be found in the perceptions of teachers. According to the Project SPAN report of a nationwide study (Social Studies in the 1980s), lack of pupil reading ability was one of the top three major problems observed by both junior and senior high school teachers in social studies.[4] Another source of information comes from the data of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In analyzing the data some found encouragement in the reading gains of low achieving nine year olds.[5] But at the same time it is made clear substantial problems exist today. LaPointe, Director of Assessment for the NAEP, has underscored the finding that after a complete elementary experience 40% of the thirteen year olds cannot read and understand their text with ease.[6] Other findings point to the difficulties of older students in acquiring the higher level reading skills needed for complex reading tasks.

Teacher Behavior. Teacher behavior is viewed here as the implementation by the teacher of sound classroom practices to facilitate reading comprehension. Two interesting and significant studies of social studies teachers have appeared in the recent literature. In 1983, Smith and Feathers collected an extensive set of observational data augmented by interviews with teachers and pupils in two middle school social studies classes. Concluded these investigators "for most students reading was

neither meaningful nor necessary."[7] The students' primary and often sole purpose in reading" was to locate specific answers to literal questions." Essentially what Smith and Feathers found confirms the results of a more extensive naturalistic inquiry into the practices of 18 master level secondary teachers in social studies in another setting. "Direct instruction in reading and related activities to lead students to higher level thinking, reported Batson, "were virtually non-existent."[8]

The elementary social studies are characterized by similar teaching practices. This was noted earlier by Durkin in 1978,[9] and confirmed by Neilsen, Rennie, and Connell in 1982.[10] Data collected by Ratekin and others in 1985,[11] suggest that this problem of teacher non involvement in comprehension instruction is not confined to social studies alone. They investigated the instructional practices of varied content area teachers, including social studies. Speculating on this phenomenon, these investigators came up with the not too surprising hypothesis that the teachers see little value in the reading practices to which they have been exposed in workshops and courses.

There may be a relationship between the lack of pupil interest in the social studies and the reluctance or inability of teachers to incorporate sound reading strategies into their teaching. (It is, of course, regrettably well established in the literature by now that pupils in general evince little interest in or enthusiasm for social studies.[12]) One study suggests this possible relationship. Hornstein studied 18 social studies classrooms with emphasis on the perspective of pupils. In addition, descriptions were provided by teachers of their patterns of instruction. Based on what pupils and teachers do in an average social

studies period this investigator found 8 models of instruction.[13] These included (1) one classroom where the teacher read the text aloud, (2) four classrooms in which the students read the text aloud, (3) four classrooms in which the teacher lectured, (4) one classroom in which the pupils copied the teacher's notes form the blackboard, (5) one classroom in which pupils spent their time outlining sections of the text, (6) three classrooms in which instruction focused on completing packets of worksheets, (7) three classrooms in which instruction dealt with correcting the previous day's assignment and working on the next, and (8) one classroom in which social studies included a wide range of activities. Given this analysis, Hornstein's conclusion is predictable. He hypothesized that the reason children "often dislike social studies is that they dislike the majority of activities which typify social studies instruction." One might also draw the conclusion from this study that most of the activities which lead to pupil dissatisfaction are simply pedagogically unsound applications of some aspect of reading (e.g., requiring pupils with reading problems to read aloud).

Readability of Social Studies Texts

In the 1976 analysis of research, social studies texts suffered in studies of readability. They were generally portrayed at virtually all levels as plagued by inordinately high and unrealistic levels of readability [14] thereby creating problems in comprehension. Several caveats were noted in 1976 concerning the application and possible abuses of the various formulas.

Today there is still no consensus on either the use or interpretation of readability formulas with one notable exception. Most researchers decry the use of the formulas as "writeability" formulas, that is using the formulas as a guide in writing texts.[15] Even in his vigorous defense of the formulas as predictors reading comprehension. Fry, a widely known developer of formulas, has admonished reading teachers that they are not to be used as a measure of "writeability."[16] The specific problem about readability of social studies that is noted in recent literature is one of marked variability in readability within a text (called "intratext variability"). [17] The absence of a clear progression of difficulty in a text is presumed to be an impediment to comprehension.

For those weary of the debate over the conventional readability formulas, there may be hope in the development of a new analytical tool which involves a consideration of meaning within passages. Phrase analysis (PHAN) assesses readability by examining three factors important in the expression of meaning: (1) reference cohesion or distance between the pronouns and their referents, (2) explicitness of relationships-the clear use of connectives, and (3) vocabulary difficulty.[18] As yet it appears that phrase analysis has not been applied extensively to the study of social studies texts.

Treatment of Reading Comprehension in Social Studies Programs

One of the most disturbing findings affecting the development of reading skills in the social studies comes from a comprehensive, carefully designed study by researchers at the Center for the Study of Reading.[19] In 1984, Armbruster and Gudbrandsen examined five widely-used commercial social studies programs at the fourth and fifth grade levels.

Specifically, the investigators sought to answer the question, how much and what kind of reading comprehension instruction is provided for students and teachers in the student textbooks and in the teacher's editions. While most of the publishers claimed their programs taught reading-related skills, there was no indication of direct instruction for these skills. Direct instruction is defined as information given to a teacher or student about how to go about a reading/studying or thinking task. It also encompasses "suggestions that a teacher or student do or say something that ought to help the student acquire the ability to understand or learn from the text."[20] A number of other problems were revealed by the study: activities were haphazardly matched with skills, different skill labels were used for similar activities and in some instances skill labels were misused. The researchers concluded that new knowledge about teaching reading comprehension is not finding its way into the social studies. "The programs," added Armbruster and Gudbrandsen "rely primarily on having students practice or apply skills without benefit of instruction in how to perform those skills."[21]

Structure for Explanation in History Texts. Utilizing recent knowledge derived from schema theory and related research on story grammar, Armbruster and Anderson examined the process of explanation in history texts.[22] In this exploratory study, they sought to determine if the explanation in the texts were characterized by an organizational structure that would facilitate learning. They derived a generic structure for historical explanations called "goal and problem/solution frames." The researchers concluded from their limited sample of texts that the quality of explanation was poor.[23]

Implications of Research in the Last Decade

For the social studies educators the research findings set forth in the preceding paragraphs should be disturbing. Whether we label it a crisis or not we are still plagued by the old, familiar problems notwithstanding all of the efforts in the last decade to find remedies. Today we find;

(a) a large number of pupils who still cannot read and comprehend their social studies texts and furthermore, probably have little desire to do so.

(b) a large number of teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels of social studies instruction who are unable or unwilling to deal effectively with problems of reading that impair learning in their classes while at the same time they deplore lack of reading ability as a major problem.

(c) social studies commercial programs which purport to teach reading skills but in fact do not.

(d) a widening gap between significant new knowledge in reading and the teaching of social studies and the production of social studies instructional materials.

What went wrong? How can we account for this seeming failure of a movement? At this point, one can only speculate. I suspect that in large measure our propensity for embracing compelling new movements or concerns (when we weary of old familiar problems) is partly responsible. Then, too, we may have saturated the market with various remedies but have provided no coherent model for relating those reading strategies to the process of instruction in the social studies. Moreover, teachers may come from

workshops and courses informed about "structured overviews", "three levels study guides", and other promising tools for facilitating comprehension. Yet, they must find the time to design these. Clearly they have received no help from publishers, for this kind of material is costly to develop and may not readily find a market.

Searching for Remedies: Possible Approaches

Pupil competence in reading in the social studies should be a high priority. Without that competence, proposals to introduce pupils to exciting "new" programs whether law related education or global studies or critical thinking are ultimately doomed to failure. Symptomatic of this tendency of some social studies educators to isolate themselves from the realities of the reading problem are the articles in April, 1985, issue of Social Education devoted to critical thinking.[24] The articles were well written and persuasively advanced a case for critical thinking yet none of the authors appeared to recognize that there is an reading/language base essential to critical thinking. As we have seen that language base is often lacking when pupils arrive in the secondary school.

The Quest for a Content Reading Model. Within the last decade, there has been a wide recognition among reading educators that language (reading) and content instruction are inseparable. Building on that recognition, several writers have attempted to design models or frameworks to facilitate the integration or reading/language skills and content. Estes and Vaughan[25] developed a plan consisting of three levels: prereading anticipation, information research (reading the assignment), and reflective reaction (post reading phase).

An earlier model by Harold Herber[26] has attracted interest. His model-called an instructional framework requires the teacher first to make certain decisions including concepts to be emphasized, each concept's relative importance to the unit, major technical vocabulary terms and the specific skills pupils need to learn the concepts. Within Herber's framework are three stages: preparation, guidance, and independence.

Some social studies educators have joined in the quest for a viable model. Peters concluded that the models offered by reading educators were inadequate to meet the needs of social studies and proposed a content processing model.[27] Essential to this model is the separation of content processing into reading processing skills described as "text dependent" and cognate processing skills labeled "text related."

Lunstrum and Irvin proposed a somewhat different approach to the integration of reading and reading related skills into social studies content.[28] They took the view that the integration of skills meant relating reading skills instruction in a logical, systematic manner to the orderly development of content. "What passes for skill development in a text," they observed, "is often a collection of unrelated activities...." Their model of an integrated teaching episode (based on the guided reading concept of Harris and Smith) incorporated six stages or phases in the framework of the episode: (1) building background, (2) setting a purpose for reading, (3) independent reading, (4) follow -up discussion, (5) developing related skills, and (6) extending and applying ideas. To demonstrate the application of their model, these writers utilized the account of the Second British Antarctic Expedition under Robert Falcon Scott and provided a detailed lesson plan with examples of strategies used in all stages.[29]

Some social studies educators have rejected proposals to integrate skills into content. Lemlech, for example, saw the danger of an overemphasis on basic skills in the Lunstrum and Irvin proposal. "Competent teachers," she observed, "have consistently used content fields to accomplish the extension of reading skills, but the concern about achieving higher level comprehension objectives has led to limited learning experiences and teaching methods that lack variety.[30]

Testing and Implementation of REading Models. What is needed at this point is the development of more promising models grounded on accurate, up-to-date knowledge about the reading process and nature of the social studies. The next step is the testing of the models in classroom settings to determine if two conditions can be met: (1) the transmission of knowledge of social studies content and (2) the improvement of reading skills (particularly comprehension and vocabulary). In addition to helping teachers organize for effective instruction, a viable model can also be useful to publishers of social studies materials in providing a workable design for the integration of reading skills into content. However, major publishers may not be interested in investing in resources to provide an effective integration. As Armbruster and Gudbrandsen point out "good instruction in content reading takes time to develop and teach."[31] In that event, one remedy may be to encourage the smaller publishers of computer based programs.

There are some indications that these publishers are already responding to this need. One in particular has developed an Urban Reader set of stories (with social studies content) on disc accompanied by a set of reading/thinking activities.[32] The same publisher preparing a series

of state histories at the upper elementary level utilizing the same format. The effort here is to provide the direct instruction in comprehension skills notably lacking in the texts of major publishers.

In the meantime, until reliable integrated content reading materials are available from commercial sources concerned school systems may have to develop their own. There are some signs that this is occurring. The typical effort at the school level usually takes the form of preparing detailed sample lesson plans based on the texts used in various content areas.[33]

The Need for New Patterns of Staff Development. In the in-service staff development workshops used in the last decade to train teachers to incorporate reading skills into content most of the emphasis appears to, have been on information transmission. Research indicates this is not only the most common pattern but also the most unpopular with teachers.[34] Another problem stems from the school system's tendency to require teachers in varied content areas to participate. Struggling to demonstrate the application of varied reading skills to five or six content areas, the consultant is less effective. Workshops should emphasize skill development and behavior change. "Coaching," contends Alvermann "is the key to the effective transfer of the training from the workshop to the classroom. Coaching in this sense is conceived as teams of teachers working together studying new skills, trying out those skills and polishing old skills."[35]

Motivation to Read and the Use of Planned Controversy. In encouraging students to read widely in the social studies, teachers are confronted by two problems" (1) the dislike and disinterest in social studies prevalent among many students, and (2) the nature of the typical

social studies text described by Patrick and Hawke as "safe and noncontroversial."[36]

To counter these conditions some writers have proposed the use of cognitive dissonance and constructive controversy in content classes.[37] Certainly the idea is not new in social studies; Hunt and Metcalf advocated this in their classic methods text in 1968.[38] What is seemingly new is the development of models to use controversy (based on dissonance theory) to motivate students to read. Alvermann has proposed a framework consisting of four steps.[39] These may be summarized as:

Step 1 The class is introduced to the idea of planned controversy and the opportunity to resolve points of contradiction.

Step 2 Background is established by having students read their texts and primary source materials or view films, etc.

Step 3 An awareness of the controversy is created by involving students in a simulation in which they are called on to take positions and make decisions related to the controversy.

Step 4 The dissonance level is increased and then activities for reducing it are initiated. Students are then encouraged to read further in suggested articles to probe the motives of those involved in the conflict or to gain information about related conflicts.

Increasing Importance of Prereading Strategies. One of the most important theoretical advances in the last decade of reading research is the emergence of schema theory.[40] This emphasizes and clarifies what teachers have already intuitively known about the role of background experience or prior knowledge in comprehending what is read. This

is particularly critical in the social studies where pupils are regularly confronted with concepts remote in time and place from their immediate experiences.

A schema is viewed as a mental outline of knowledge about a topic or "an organized framework with slots to be filled by information from the text or, default values based on previous experience."[41]

Consistent with schema theory recent research indicates that prereading activities facilitate better comprehension by helping pupils "activate a schema" or relate prior knowledge more efficiently to reading assignments.

Effective use of a prereading strategy does not place a burden in extensive planning on the teacher. A wide range of tested prereading strategies are available to the social studies teachers.[42] Many of these, including prediction strategies, are particularly well suited to social studies content. The strategies may be applied to three different types of situations suggested by the following:

(1) building background when students know little about the subject,

(2) anticipating information when students know something about the subject, and

(3) organizing information when students know a lot about the subject.

Preteaching Vocabulary in the Social Studies. Preteaching difficult vocabulary has been fairly common as a prereading activity. Unfortunately, the conventional approach was not always effective. It usually took the form of a narrow, associational approach-listing words on the board and explaining their meanings. Recent research indicates to be effective in

promoting comprehension vocabulary development must be characterized by: (1) breadth of training in the use of words, (2) active processing, (3) more practice with the words to be learned, and (4) multiple exposure to words in different contexts.

When these guidelines are followed, preteaching of vocabulary can result in significant gains. This has been demonstrated by Carney and others in teaching social studies.[43]

Conclusions

From this brief survey of research relating to reading in the social studies some tentative conclusions appear warranted. They may be summarized as:

(1) the progress in dealing with the reading problems identified a decade ago has been disappointing,

(2) the recent advances in reading research make it imperative that classroom teachers, developers of instructional materials and social studies educators become better informed on the significant new advances in research into the reading process that have significance for the social studies. If this is not done, the gap will only widen between reliable knowledge about reading and classroom practices and instructional materials in social studies,

(3) we have within our grasp the knowledge and the conceptual tools to make a difference, i.e., making texts and materials more comprehensible and motivating students to read competently and value the social studies.

(4) National Professional Organizations in Social Studies and in Reading have a unique opportunity to provide much needed leadership.

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